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Backgrounder: Portland's Romance with Rail

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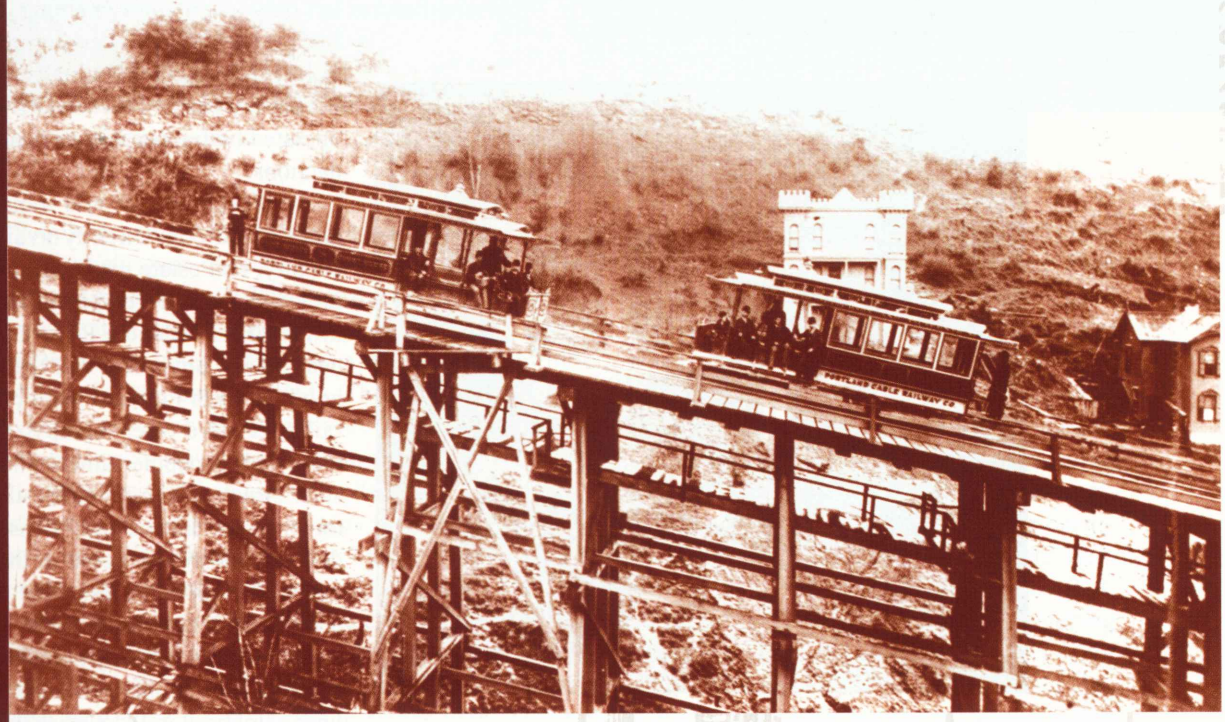
Portland's Romance with Rail

by Shelley Holly

The Portland metropolitan region has had a long, sometimes checkered history with mass transit in general and rail transport in particular. The story of rail travel in the region is one of an initial cycle of great activity, followed by decline culminating in dormancy. Then, in 1986, a long – roughly three-decades long – interregnum was terminated by the reappearance of rail cars on the streets of the metroscape.

This backgrounder is designed to fill in some of the blanks and give some historical substance to one of the metroscape's most distinguishing features and one which, not incidentally, shaped the very physical aspect of the region: its affinity for rail travel.

The love affair with rail in the Willamette Valley began long before the area became known for its light rail system or its more recent streetcar line in downtown. The history and landscape patterns of the metropolitan area are intertwined with the rail network that was established early throughout the valley. Portland was established in 1853, and only two decades later, in 1871, a horsecar line was granted a franchise to run along First Street. By the 1880s, lines were installed through the downtown area, presumably to allow coaches to travel more easily through the heavily muddied river bank streets of the young city. Before long, these privately funded endeavors had blanketed the west side of



The Council Crest streetcar in 1891. Photograph courtesy of the City of Portland Stanley Parr Archives and Records Center.

Photograph courtesy of the City of Portland
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the city with tracks and also had ventured into East Portland. This pattern allowed development to sprawl onto the other side of the Willamette, widening the city that had previously formed on a north-south axis along the river.

Interurban lines usually were powered by steam engine and connected the central business district of Portland with nearby smaller communities such as Mount Tabor and Sunnyside. More distant towns such as Oregon City, Estacada, Orenco, and Vancouver were also served. Private lines were sometimes subsidized by funds from towns eager to gain connection to the rail network. The need for rail passage across the Willamette and the Columbia rivers prompted bridge construction. Passengers benefited from the extended networks, and in the early 1900s one could cross the Columbia between Vancouver and East Portland for 25 cents. By 1913, Orenco in eastern Washington County, with a population of 500, was generating approximately 1,000 trips a month on the interurban line, with a trip to Portland taking 45 minutes.

At the end of the 19th century, electric lines replaced the horse drawn cars and some of the steam interurban lines. In addition to the electric lines, a system of cable cars allowed access to the West Hills area just above downtown Portland. Although several companies developed the metropolitan area's rail network, by the early 1900s mergers and financial failures left only one major remaining company, Portland Railway Light & Power Company (PRL&P), the utility that would eventually become known as Portland General Electric (PGE). The company operated both inner city lines and interurban connections.

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As electric power and transportation became readily and conveniently available early in the century, real estate men seized the opportunity to utilize rail as a development tool. Soon communities like Portland's Rose City Park Addition near Sandy Boulevard and the Alberta neighborhood in North Portland were built. Although the rail cars were often bumpy, drafty, and dusty, they were a popular amenity. The formation of such streetcar communities allowed workers to travel to the increasingly dense inner city every day and still return home in the evening for dinner with their families. The evolution of such communities connected to the inner business district facilitated a steady population growth for the budding metropolis, while also establishing distinct neighborhood identities throughout the city.

This pattern of development, a central city surrounded by thriving neighborhoods with their own small commercial areas, began to change as the privately owned automobile became a more affordable and therefore more ubiquitous sight on the streets of

Photograph courtesy of the City of Portland
Stanley Parr Archives and Records Center

Top. Council Crest trolley circa 1920 with driver. Bottom. Council Crest trolley with driver in 1973.

Photograph courtesy of the City of Portland
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The hustle and bustle of downtown Portland at SW Fourth Avenue and Morrison in 1939.

Portland. People began driving to work and shopping in large supermarkets some distance from home, rather than at the corner grocery store. The little districts dedicated to trade that dotted the region were dependent on local foot traffic, and they suffered as a result of the greater mobility that the car provided. Though common throughout the region in the early 20th century, these shopping districts slowly forfeited much of their livelihood to larger regional shopping malls that arose in the middle years of the century – places such as the Lloyd Center and Washington Square Mall, which offered vast acres of parking to the ever-growing army of the auto-addicted. As a response to the competition of the automobile, transit companies around the metroscape began, as early as the 1920s, to utilize motor buses because they were not restricted to routes with stationary electric wires or tracks.

By 1919 there were approximately 30,000 cars in Portland. But it was not just the car that weakened Portland's railway. The wartime depression of 1915-1917 roiled the local economy and leached riders from among the work force commuting to their jobs each day. This weakness in ridership prompted another problem when, in 1917, PRL&P attempted to raise fares on its intracity trolleys to cover lost revenues and increased wages. The nickel fare for trolley travel was a standard in Portland, and when the company raised fares to six cents, riders rebelled and passenger numbers dropped precipitously. Another problem occurring at the same time was the "pay-as-you-enter," one-operator railway cars that were introduced in 1918. PRL&P had made the change, which involved getting rid of conductors on the cars, in order to lower labor costs. Passengers were not unduly troubled by the disappearance of the conductors, but the savings in wages was more than counterbalanced by the fact that the cars could not be utilized on heavily traveled routes. The streetcars never really recovered from the turmoil

Photograph courtesy of the City of Portland Stanley Parr Archives and Records Center

Portland tram in 1947, at the west end of the Broadway Bridge.

caused by these changes. At approximately the same time, the local lumber industry suffered a downturn. Compounding this difficulty was the extension of the network of reliable surface roads and bridges throughout the region and the metamorphosis of the car into the truck. These successive blows caused the interurbans to suffer steady losses in freight tonnage, inexorably shrinking their profit margin.

By 1924, rail travel was in great distress. When PRL&P changed its name to Portland Electric Power Company (PEPCO) some felt the company was merely trying to distance itself from its shaky rail business. In addition, the company betrayed its railway tradition: it started a bus company called Oregon City Motor Bus Company operating between Portland and the Clackamas County seat. It also began operating cross-town buses from East (now Northeast) 39th Street.

The Great Depression and World War II did nothing to strengthen rail travel in the metroscape. In fact, by 1950 the last electric streetcars – those on the NW 23rd Avenue, Council Crest, and Willamette Heights runs – were retired. As automobile dominance took a toll on transit companies across the nation, TriMet took over operation of the region's bus system in 1969 from the privately owned and operated Rose City Transit, a linear descendant of PRL&P's rail subsidiary.

Talk of a resurgence of rail as a transit alternative in the metroscape occurred soon after addiction to the automobile appeared a forgone conclusion. Portland, like many cities throughout the nation, suffered from a dying downtown in the 1970s as suburbs thrived and shopping malls spread across the terrain. In an attempt to revive downtown and reduce congestion, Portland in conjunction with TriMet began looking at light rail as a transit option that would connect the outer lying communities with the heart of downtown. TriMet received substantial federal funding distributed by the Urban Mass Transit Administration. In 1986, the Metropolitan Area Express, or MAX, rolled through town on freshly laid tracks paved with cobblestone.

The MAX system grew. It now has two lines with over 50 stops connecting more than 80 bus routes throughout the region. Transportation connectivity between modes has been an important factor in the success of the metroscape's light rail. Stops include the Portland International Airport, the Rose Quarter, and several city centers, including Gresham and Hillsboro. Once again rail is influencing land use patterns as density is increased near stations. Pedestrian friendly communities and mixed-use

developments are emerging across the region, and neighborhood retail is a viable option once again.

In 2001, a streetcar line was added in downtown Portland with tracks running North and South and crossing the East-West Axis of the MAX line. The streetcar, much like historical lines, acts as a people circulator. On the weekends, vintage trolleys built from original historic blueprints of the Council Crest trolley can be seen collecting shoppers and tourists from the redeveloping Pearl District to the Urban Center Plaza of the Portland State University campus. Extensions of this line and the additions of other lines in nearby communities are on the table for discussion, as is a 15-mile commuter rail line from Wilsonville to Beaverton that will link five Regional and Town Centers in Washington County.

Although many of the tracks from the original urban railway age are paved over, communities throughout the region are descendants of the time when rail laid magical pathways through the landscape. In recent years, light rail and streetcars, the modern successors of the trolleys and the heavier interurban lines, have seen resurgence in popularity as people tire of automobile congestion. Real estate developers of communities such as Orenco Station and the Pearl District are again capitalizing on rail as a desirable amenity. According to TriMet, over 80,000 riders utilize the light rail lines throughout the region each day. Land use zoning codes are being revised to better utilize centralized business districts surrounding light rail stations, and light rail and streetcar tracks recently have been laid in communities that originally were established in large part because of the rail lines that thrived nearly a century ago.

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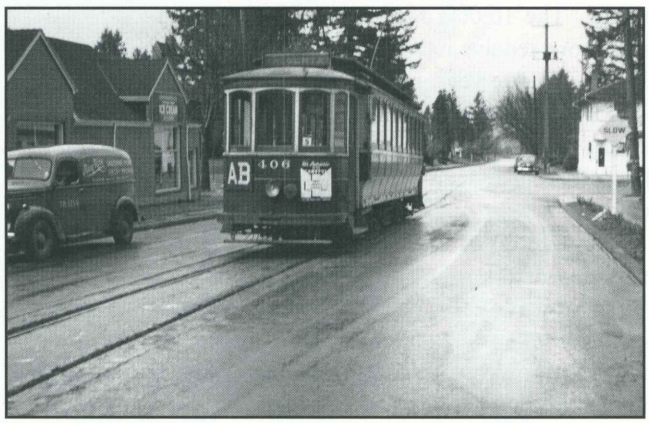

Trolleys ran all over the city in the 1930s. This 1938 photograph was taken at NE 30th and Ainsworth. Photograph courtesy of the City of Portland Stanley Parr Archives and Records Center.

A vintage trolley runs on the streetcar line in 2002 through the "Pearl."